

MEMORY POLITICS: EDUCATION, MEMORIALS AND MASS MEDIA

Eleventh Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality

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Coming to terms with a painful past is found crucial for the social reconstruction of societies emerging from armed conflict or totalitarian rule with a legacy of large-scale atrocities against the enemy or own population. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”, is how the Spanish philosopher Santayana expressed the importance of memory and remembrance for post-conflict reconciliation and peacebuilding (Santayana 1905).¹ Yet, memory is a double-edged sword: It can either lead to understanding and overcoming existing ethnic, religious or social cleavages and thereby foster sustainable peace or it can perpetuate them and thereby harden conflicting positions.

Remembering the past tends to be selective and simplified. Especially in conflict areas, representations of the “other”, for example in a state’s history education or in national media, are often biased and intended to support the interests and claims of particular groups at the cost of others. As contending historical narratives are closely connected to group identities and sense of victimization, finding an appropriate and acceptable balance of the opposing understandings of past events is particularly important for successful state- and nation-building. Reconciliation understood as a process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future is thus a highly political and controversial long-term process requiring many painful compromises by the parties involved (Bloomfield / Barnes / Huyse 2003).

As part of a series of conferences and workshops organized under the heading “I Have A Dream: Political Culture in Divided Societies” (for more information, see: <http://www.irmgard-coninx-stiftung.de>), the Eleventh Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality seek to assess the role that history teaching, public memorialization projects, as well as the mass media play in contemporary reconciliation and identity formation processes in post-conflict or post-totalitarian societies worldwide. As indicated below, papers may address either specific issues relating to actors, policies and best practices or discuss public history education and remembrance more theoretically by focusing on the relationship between collective memories, the construction of identities and post-conflict reconciliation. Papers are also welcomed that analyze the approaches and impact of mass media such as television and the internet in these processes.

The Roundtables will bring together about 50 young(er) scholars, activists and journalists to discuss their work in three interdisciplinary workshops and panel discussions from 21-26 October 2009. In addition, international experts will hold accompanying evening lectures and will be available for in-depth discussions in the workshop.

Nation-building and Historical Narratives

In the 19th and 20th centuries, young nation states strove to create and legitimize their particular national narratives and to foster social cohesion and national unity by various means. In many countries, history teaching as well as museums and memorials were used to

¹ For the purposes of this paper, “post-conflict” reconciliation and peacebuilding is understood in a wide sense including social reconstruction processes in post-totalitarian societies.

bolster a national identity and citizenship based on national myths and heroes mostly in clear distinction to neighboring enemy states or discriminated minority groups. However, in the second half of the 20th century, the concept of the nation state was challenged, a process that results in different forms of national narrations in history education and other forms of history representation.

Globalization, migration and an increasingly interdependent world gradually force states to inform their population also about developments outside the national context and to recognize different narratives of historical key events or periods. Moreover, the increasing emphasis on human rights and individual actorhood independent of states, as well as the growing importance of ethnic, religious and political movements and identities add a whole new dimension to traditional state-centered history teaching and memorialization. Particularly in the Western world, these factors redefine national prerogatives and change existing conceptions of international relations and history that need to be incorporated into national curricula (Soysal / Schissler 2005).

Acknowledging Past Wrongs

Since the end of the Cold War, these developments are paralleled by increasing involvement of the international community in conflicts and peace processes around the world. At the same time, serious efforts were undertaken to make states and individual leaders accountable for crimes against humanity and massive human rights violations. Transitional justice programmes were introduced in many post-conflict scenarios following ethnic cleansing campaigns or totalitarian dictatorships. Among them are international criminal tribunals, truth and reconciliation commissions and reparation programmes. Underlying is the belief that the cleavages of the past can only be overcome if the pain and suffering of the victims is recognized both on the collective and on the individual level and that those responsible for the past atrocities are brought to justice (Mani 2002). Both processes require that the truth about the conflictual past must be adequately represented and remembered before peace can settle in.

But it is not only in contemporary peace processes that victims or their descendents claim recognition and reparation for previous human rights violations committed in large-scale against their groups. Conflicts resulting from a lack of acknowledgement of historical injustices such as colonialism or the slave trade often develop in and around migrant communities or religious minorities in the midst of modern democratic societies (Barkan 2000). The more different groups speak up demanding public recognition of their particular narrative and seeking redress for the pain suffered, the more a competition in victimhood and a potential proliferation of memorials is becoming an issue.

The Importance of Education and Memorialization

Despite the fact that post-conflict reconciliation is a long-term process and that transitional justice mechanisms should be matched by corresponding educational activities, history education reform and memorialization initiatives receive comparatively little attention by policy-makers and researchers concerned with social reconstruction in post-conflict areas (Cole / Barsalou 2006). Relevant domestic actors often prefer social amnesia and avoid addressing the conflict history and past rights abuses with a view on promoting short-term stability and “to look to the future”. External actors and donors involved in transitional justice programs, on the other hand, generally view education and national memory as domestic issues that should be best tackled by “insiders”.

Yet, linking history education and memory work more strongly to post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction enhances the impact and sustainability of both fields. Given their complementary nature, revising history textbooks and curricula should be made a key component of any transitional justice program attempting to cope with past atrocities and a conflict-ridden history. How schools navigate through and promote historical narratives through history education determines in part whether social reconstruction following violent conflict and massive human rights violations actually takes place or not (Sinclair 2005). Similarly, the representation of historical facts and of the conflicting parties in museums and memorials could increase the impact of established transitional justice mechanisms (Barsalou / Baxter 2007).

In the public discourse on past events and the construction of identities, the stance and use of the mass media, television and internet, are of major significance (Reljić 2001). The media serve to witness and to save particular news and narratives in collective memories. They also spread them quickly among large parts of the population and can influence public attitudes and debates to a great extent. Guided by commercial interests, the news industry tends to report on catchy negative events instead of less visible long-term progress in reconciliation and peacebuilding (Howard / Rolt / van de Veen / Verhoeven 2003). On the other hand, movies and documentaries are produced that reconstruct and remember historical events and thereby contribute to breaking up silence about a loaded past. The internet can serve as a useful memory platform by creating discussion fora and virtual sites of remembrance. The mass media's general focus on pictures allows that emotions are easily stirred up and that information is provided in an easily accessible and digestible form. As a consequence, the danger prevails that complex relations are portrayed in a superficial, selective and overly simplified way while the impression of authenticity and historical accuracy is given. Moreover, the mass availability of data in the internet increases the selective reception of information and allows that users develop personal truths and extremist interpretations of a conflicting history and group relations.

Post-conflict reconciliation is a painful and intergenerational process within which many compromises have to be made and which may suffer many set-backs (Rigby 2003). In the search for an acceptable and appropriate representation of relevant collective sufferings, the findings and reports of transitional justice mechanisms such as war crimes tribunals or truth commission should play a significant role. The major challenge of post-conflict history education and remembrance seems to be to represent history in a way that the forensic facts of previous atrocities are acknowledged while enough common ground is found for former enemies to work towards a shared future (Barton / Levstik 2004).

The essay competition and workshops seek to analyze and to compare different practices and policies applied with respect to history education, memorialization projects and the mass media in post-conflict situations as well as in fragmented multiethnic societies. Applicants are invited to submit essays addressing the topic "memory politics" from a practitioner's or field viewpoint or a theoretical perspective informed by relevant academic disciplines such as peace studies, education, collective memory studies, trauma and testimony studies etc. Essays shall have a length of approx. 2,500 words (with an abstract of approx. 250 words) and relate to the following issues and/or questions:

Policies, Actors and Timing

Essays may explore what policies states and civil society actors employ to cope with contending historical narratives or the discriminatory representation of marginalized groups. Who are the major national and international actors in history education reform and/or in conceptualizing and establishing museums or memorials that (should) address a dividing and painful past? What are their motives for particular reform initiatives or for choosing certain representations of the conflict history or involved interest groups over others? In how far is memorialization related to gender issues and considerations of social justice? Does it matter whether memory projects of national or international significance are promoted and carried out by private actors or by state authorities? How do relevant actors make use of the media to publicize reconciliation activities and projects in this context?

Papers may also address issues of timing and sequencing of various transitional justice mechanisms such as war crime tribunals, truth commissions or reparation programs with respect to history education reform and public memorialization projects. Is there any optimal timing for different transitional justice processes to complement and reinforce each other? Participants could also focus on the relationship between public education and memorialization and the wider discourse within society on a conflicted past. For example, in how far should the revision of a history textbooks or the establishment of national museums be preceded or accompanied by a general willingness of the public to face past atrocities or massive human rights violations? What role do media broadcasts, movies addressing contentious historical issues, or discussion platforms in the internet play in this context?

To what extent should history teaching or national remembrance mirror the general historical discourses in society? If significant parts of a population prefer not to be reminded of atrocities committed in their names, it may be asked whether public education and memorialization activities should actively force a society to come to terms with its painful past. Have there been any experiences with societies that revised their textbooks and curricula too early or in a too progressive manner and thereby fostered further conflict by provoking reactionary aggressions? How can history teachers in post-conflict environments be protected if they address controversial historical events? In a similar vein, papers may analyze scenarios when public or private museums or memorials cause so much controversy that special protection needs to be provided.

Best Practices in History Representation and Remembrance

With a more practical focus, papers may also address concrete issues and best practices relating to history education, memorialization projects and the mass media in the context of post-conflict reconciliation or the acknowledgement of past injustices in divided societies. Which best practices exist in developing new history teaching material and courses or in conceptualizing museums and memorials commemorating contentious historical events and group relations? By which means, for example through the establishment of bi-national or pluralistic textbook or history commissions or by using reports of internationally recognized jurisprudence or truth commissions, can contending historical narratives be reconciled best? What are the experiences with parallel binarrative representations of history in textbooks or in museums? When dealing with different historical narratives, in how far does it make a difference whether a particular contested narrative belongs to the majority or a marginalized minority group? Is it useful to avoid focusing on national idols and stereotypes and to tell representative personal stories instead? Should history teaching be connected to other forms of education such as civic, peace and/or human rights education?

Participants could also focus on didactic issues in representing, teaching and spreading certain historical narratives and information on contentious group relations. Essays could, for example, explore in how far alternative means of communication such as film, theatre, music or literature helps teachers to make pupils learn democratic behavior and respect for members of the “other” group? Similar questions could be posed with respect to the composition of exhibitions on contentious historical issues or events. How can historical research or other relevant data best be disseminated to a public that is generally overloaded with information? How much text should museums or memorials use to reach their visitors best while still providing a fair and balanced picture of complex historical relations? Does the display of authentic historical objects and the portrayal of true stories increase the visitors’ consciousness about historical facts or is awareness better raised by more “catchy” fiction? Related questions could be discussed concerning documentaries or movies addressing historical topics or with respect to information provided the internet. With respect to the media, papers could also focus on strategies to increase well-informed coverage of or programs on serious historical or social issues instead of superficial television shows. Strategies may include special funding or quota for non-profit programs with a reconciliation or peacebuilding impetus or the promotion of contentious issues in commercial popular programs such as soap operas. Papers could also focus on post-conflict capacity-building measures like the training of journalists or the establishment of media monitoring mechanisms to safeguard fair and balanced reporting and to prevent unbiased representations and hate speech.

Memory, Identities and Reconciliation

In addition to contributions on concrete policy issues and best practices, competition participants are also invited to submit papers that discuss history education and memory politics in relation to peace- and nation-building processes from a more general or theoretical perspective. For example, critical questions could be asked whether or in how far history teaching, memorialization projects and related media activities foster and preserve collective memories, perpetuate victimization and contribute to the formation of cultural, ethnic or national identities. What and in what time periods can history education and public memorialization contribute to social reconstruction and peace? Should history education and public remembrance also aim at nation- or state-building? Essays could discuss to what extent a society should work towards one national narrative or allow fragmented and potentially contradicting versions of history? Following violent conflict and grave human rights violations, does it make sense to temper certain truths, for example those described in the findings of truth commissions, in order to promote interethnic reconciliation and social cohesion? Is it conceivable that social progress and peace is under certain conditions better served by amnesia and forgetting?

Literature

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